

Christmas Ghosts by crystalkei

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Summary:

Christmas Prompt

Joyce: You forgot to mention our other superlative? Hopper: I thought that one we make pretty clear?

A future fic where Joyce and Hopper celebrate Christmas with the grandkids.

Christmas Ghosts

1998

Joyce stood on the steps of the townhouse porch and waited.

“Mom!” Will said when he opened the door, pulling her into a tight hug. “The drive wasn’t bad, was it?”

“No, just snow, hasn’t gotten icy yet,” Joyce answered, smiling wide at Will.

“Where’s Hopper?”

“Oh, getting the bags.”

“You let him carry your stuff?”

“I lost a bet,” she explained, turning to see Hopper trudging up the walkway to the front of the house, laden with bags.

“I’m coming.” Hopper nodded at Will and walked through the open door, Joyce gave Will a look and followed him in.

Hopper disappeared down the hall into the guest room and Joyce hung up her coat, unable to stop smiling. The house was warm and smelled like cinnamon. Annie was a great cook, she and Will had met in college when their friend groups had collided during some kind of potluck war. The two of them took turns winning the weekly trophy for best dish. Joyce loved the story so much she’d tell random people at the grocery store, desperate to show how she hadn’t failed her boys by being a shitty cook. Good had come out of the skills they learned in the absence of her own abilities.

“Well, where’s the baby?” Joyce asked, following Will into the living room. “Where’s your brother?”

“Annie’s taking a nap, Jonathan took the kids to pick up the pizza.” Will looked over his shoulder towards the kitchen. “Do you want

anything, Diet Coke?"

"Not yet, I'm fine. Glad to finally be here." She sat on the sofa and Will took a spot in the chair across from her and she couldn't help but just stare in awe over the man he'd become. He might never have gotten this far. He could have died.

They made the trip to Chicago every Christmas. Jonathan lived there as well. He and Nancy made a go of it in college, they got married and then divorced when the twins were just babies, after Nancy had finished law school. Jonathan would have stayed in New York but he was determined not to be his father so he picked up and followed his ex wife to Chicago where they lived in a duplex and did the shared custody thing that Joyce had only imagined. Well, except she'd never wanted to live that close to Lonnie and Jonathan and Nancy were still friends. It was absolutely bonkers to Joyce (and Hopper, but he usually kept it to himself unless Joyce started to rant and he firmly backed her up with "I know, it seems totally batshit to me too, but it's working for them.")

"What was the bet you lost?" Will asked, but Joyce didn't have a chance to answer because in came a herd of kids.

"Grandma Joyce!" the kids shouted and Joyce gladly turned and welcomed the bunch into her arms.

She ended up with Jonathan's twins, Matthew and Ryan, in each arm and Will's three year old, Devon, on her lap. Jonathan came in, carrying several pizzas and waved.

"Got a pineapple and ham pizza, just for you, Mom," he hollered from the kitchen.

"Did you bring us lots of presents?" Matthew asked, all doe eyed and adorable. "Did you bring us presents from Grandma Karen too?"

Joyce's brow wrinkled. "Was I supposed to?"

"You gotta bring presents for Christmas!" Ryan countered from the other side.

"The car was loaded down with presents, but I didn't bring any from

your other grandma. Pretty sure you're going to see her for those gifts." She leaned in closer, lowering her voice, the twins followed her lead, leaning in for the secret. "Plus I've seen the gifts Grandma Karen got you, they're good, but mine are better."

"Mom!" Jonathan scolded, coming in with slices of pizza on paper plates for the kids.

Joyce laughed. "Oh stop, Karen and I have a great competition worked up as dueling grandmas."

"They really do," Hopper cut in, finally back from putting the bags in the guest room.

Jonathan gave Hopper a look, it didn't matter that Joyce was the one Jonathan was scolding. Hopper always got the harsh looks from Jonathan. She used to worry about it, now she chalked it up to Jonathan being protective and Hopper being...well, himself. And she ignored them.

The kids though, jumped excited off her lap and started tugging at Hopper's legs and arms.

"Chief, Chief, Chief," the chorus of kids went and Joyce rolled her eyes.

There was quite the hemming and hawing over what the grandkids should call him when grandkids started existing. Hopper didn't even come when Joyce visited Jonathan and Nancy when the twins were born. He was still coasting on the argument that he wasn't really part of the family and Jonathan certainly didn't want him in his house. (Joyce had told him though, how Jonathan had mentioned wishing there was another pair of hands. Twins were no joke and Jonathan in those first few years learned very quickly not to turn down help.)

But he'd settled on Chief after the twins first birthday party when Ted had referred to him as such and Ryan had latched onto it. Grandpa Ted, Grandma Karen, Grandma Joyce, and Chief. It had worked because Hopper had a tendency to keep his distance from certain things, but at this point, he was all in, as illustrated by the scene

playing out with the boys.

“You can’t have candy before dinner!” Hopper made a big show of pointing at the pizza that Jonathan had set out for them. “After dinner you can have candy!”

Then he slipped his hands into his pockets and brought out three fun sized bags of M&Ms and handed one to each boy. “Don’t tell anyone about this.” As if the entire living room didn’t see it. He ruffled their hair and shooed them towards the coffee table and their plates.

“Okay so the bet you lost?” Will asked, handing Joyce a paper plate with pizza on it.

“Oh, right,” Joyce said, shaking her head at Hopper. “So Hop has a terrible cough, but don’t worry, it’s not contagious.”

“Because I’m not sick,” he said, heading into the kitchen.

“Right, well I thought he might be coming down with something and didn’t want him around the new baby. I’ve been bugging him to go to the doctor to get it checked out.”

“She bet I wouldn’t go.” He handed Joyce a Diet Coke.

“You never go. You haven’t been in three years, easy,” Joyce said, raising an eyebrow at him, then she turned back to Will. “He never goes. I didn’t think he would. I was gonna make him stay home.”

“But...” Hopper straightened his shoulders and stood up taller.

“He went. And it turns out he needs to quit smoking. But he’s not sick.”

“You needed a doctor to tell you to quit smoking?” Jonathan asked with a scoff.

“He’s not listening to the doctor.” Joyce picked up her slice of pizza and bit into it.

“Mom quit smoking like ten years ago,” Will said.

“Your mother is a stronger person than I am, I’ve never once argued the fact,” Hopper said, standing behind her chair.

Joyce scoffed. “It’s downright shocking that you were voted *Most Likely To Get Into A Fight With An Inanimate Object*, dear.”

Hopper shrugged.

“That’s incredibly specific,” Jonathan noted.

“It was the year your mother was voted *Most Likely To Win A Pie Eating Contest*, so yeah, it was an off year for the Yearbook committee,” Hopper said.

“You forgot to mention the other superlative we were named.”

“Didn’t think the kids wanted to hear about that.” He tilted his head towards Jonathan.

“Please tell me you two were voted cutest couple,” Annie said, having finally emerged from the bedroom with a swaddled baby in her arms.

Joyce almost tossed the plate on her lap when she stood up, but at the last minute she remembered to set it on the side table as she rushed for Annie. She gave her a side hug to avoid crushing the baby, and held her hands away, since they had some pizza grease on them. But she couldn’t help herself, she had to see her newest grandbaby, the first girl.

“Let me wash my hands and then I’m not going to let you hold her for a solid hour, god, look at her little nose!” Joyce turned from the newborn to Annie with a bright smile on her face. “What’d you two name her? When Will called from the hospital he said you were still deciding.”

She kept looking at the scrunched up, bundle of pink wrinkles and soft skin, unaware of the eye rolls of her sons.

“Madeline, we’ll call her Maddy for short, Madeline Sarah.”

If she believed in superpowers, (and maybe she did, maybe she didn’t, she’d seen a lot in her life,) Joyce would say that she could

feel Hopper's muscles tense from across the room. She didn't notice her own wince but Will did.

"We're not set on that middle name," Will cut in, looking between Joyce and Hopper.

Annie snorted. "It's pretty set in stone, they sent off the paperwork."

She was clearly out of the loop.

Joyce wasn't sure what she expected from Hopper but she wasn't surprised when he mumbled, "cute baby" and excused himself to the back porch.

"What happened?" Annie asked, confused.

—

It had been 20 years, but the wound had never healed, just as it scabbed over, he picked at it and it started all over again.

And he took full responsibility for picking. Will didn't mean anything by this. Hopper was being too sensitive to it. He recognized it. But it'd been awhile since he'd had a good grief spiral so he was due for it.

He hadn't brought his coat out and though it had stopped snowing, the temperature was dropping fast. He pulled a cigarette from the pack he kept in his shirt pocket and lit it.

"You gotta quit smoking," Will said, coming out to stand on the deck with him. "You can't die."

Hopper considered ignoring him, but this one actually liked him so he knew he should make the effort.

"Your brother would love it if I dropped dead, come on."

"Not now. Mom will want to move up here, she'll be back to her old smothering ways. There's not room at my house, she'll want to live with Jonathan."

"She loves you. She has good reason to hover," Hopper defended Joyce.

He understood completely why she did it. It felt almost cruel that he had to defend her for it considering the reminder of what he didn't have.

"I know but still, don't die and leave her, she needs you."

"She doesn't need me." Joyce might even do better if he weren't around, but selfishly, he ignored that and clung to her. He'd been doing that for 15 years now.

"Self deprecating isn't your color." Will laughed. "I could say it a hundred times but there's no point so I won't."

Hopper leaned against the railing and looked out, seeing the other townhomes decked out in Christmas lights. Felt like a good time to change the subject. "That drugstore on the corner, is it open late?"

"Yeah, you need something?"

"Your mom forgot her night cream."

"Mom uses night cream?" Will asked, surprised.

"You think her skin looks like that all on it's own? She's 55 years old. Your mother is nothing but anxiety, sarcastic jokes, and moisturizer. She's beautiful and ageless because of the Pond's company. I don't know where the other parts come from. Probably your shit father."

Will snorted. "Yeah, the place is open until midnight. I can go get it for her, though."

"Nah, it's getting icy out there. I'll do it." He wanted the excuse to leave anyway. He crushed his cigarette into the wooden railing of the deck and then tossed the butt in the trashcan.

"It's a family name," Will blurted out. "On Annie's side I mean. I should've had Mom warn you though."

"Dunno what you're talking about." Hopper kept his eyes on the

Christmas lights, if he avoided Will's face, this would all go quicker.

"I didn't hate it though, I liked honoring her. But I understand that makes you uncomfortable."

"You didn't know her."

Will hesitated a second. "But I feel connected to her."

"What the hell for?" He wasn't angry, more baffled.

Will didn't say anything, like he was working himself up for something big.

"I'm the one you could save."

"Jesus fuck." Hopper backed off the railing and looked anywhere but at Will. "You wanna help me quit smoking, don't say shit like that."

"Sorry," Will muttered.

"Your mom saved you. I was just backup. I know what you heard from your dumbass friends but your mom is the brave one."

He knew that Will had a misplaced sense of hero worship, had since they'd brought him back. But every time Hopper was confronted with it (and it'd been six or seven times in the last 15 years) it still made him cringe. So it made perfect sense to go back into the house, right out the front door, and head to the Rite Aid on the corner, leaving a chastised Will in his wake.

By the time he got back, everyone in the house was in their respective areas. Hopper only heard the hum of the dishwasher going, and saw the lights dimmed in the living room framing the Christmas tree, so he went straight to the guest bedroom where he assumed Joyce would be.

"Hey," she said when he came in and he tossed the tiny jar of overpriced moisturizer on the duvet next to her. "I thought maybe you'd gone home, how'd you know I needed this?"

"You mentioned three times on the way up here that you left it. Cops

and details but you said it three times, Joyce.”

“Thanks.”

He sat down on the bed and bent over to take his boots off. She was in her pajamas, leaned against the headboard reading. He recognized the pajamas with snowflakes on them as the pajamas that the twins got her last year for Christmas. He smiled to himself, thinking about her grandma competition with Karen.

“I was thinking,” she said, tentative because apparently everyone was worried they’d set him off somehow. “I don’t have to be back at work until the 27th, you don’t either, instead of going home right after Christmas, why don’t we drive over to Indianapolis?”

He leaned back, lying on the bed, his head perpendicular with her thighs. “What for?”

“Thought you might wanna visit her grave, you could call Diane, you two could go out there.”

Joyce was a hundred times more relaxed and accepting of his ex as he was of her ex. To be fair, Diane wasn’t a giant tool with stupid hair so...the bar wasn’t exactly difficult to clear.

“Let’s go,” he said, as she combed a hand through his thinning hair absently. “But I want you to come with me.”

He’d never taken her there. He’d always gone with Diane. They didn’t go often, but when he tried to go by himself it felt weird, disrespectful even. Like they should both be there, like the ghost of his child knew her parents hadn’t survived her death. But it’d been six years since he’d been and he wanted Joyce to stand by him.

“Okay.” It was calm and collected but he felt her hand still in his hair.

“If you want, I can go by myself if you don’t-”

“No, I want to.” Her voice almost cracked.

It was funny how these things worked. How she’d find such comfort

in him asking her to stand with him while he grieved.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Hope you got more candy for the boys when you were at the store.”

“A whole other bag. Jonathan is gonna give me the evil eye all week.” He was happy for the shift away from more serious conversation and he sat up to face her.

“Good plan, can’t have Grandpa Ted out spoiling Chief,” she said, a wicked gleam in her eye.

“Ted will never beat me at anything, but it’s cute you’re trying to drag me into your competition.” Hopper leaned in and kissed her.

“We’re winning the competition though!” she said when he pulled back.

Hopper stood up to take his shirt off but was startled by the sound of a newborn baby crying in the other room. Joyce put her book down and he felt her walking around the bed, her hand slid across his shoulders as she went. She leaned down and kissed his cheek.

“Goodnight, dear, I’m gonna go let those new parents sleep and do better than Karen grandma stuff.”

Hopper took a deep breath and shook his head. “I’ll come, too.”

“Good. We’re definitely winning the competition like this.”

“This one isn’t even their grandkid,” he noted.

“Hush, we’re winning.”

Author's Note:

not all of my christmas prompts will be long enough for me to put them on ao3 but you can read them as they're posted on tumblr at cupcakesandtv :)